Good morning, Moon Valley!

We continue our sermon series titled, ▶ “Standing Firm When Shaken.” It is a study through the New Testament letter of 2 Thessalonians, written by the apostle Paul.

Our text for today is ▶ 2 Thessalonians 3:1-5. From this text, we are going to learn something about prayer.

For a preacher, this is risky for a number of reasons.

First, while prayer is vitally important, it is not a particularly hot topic these days. In fact, for some, it ranks right up there with discussing the IRS tax code or watching paint dry.

And for many, prayer has been a mysterious, uncomfortable, unnatural, and unfulfilling thing to do.

Moreover, very few people with some familiarity with the Bible feel particularly good about their prayer life. A lot of us feel like we don’t measure up.

You may have noticed that the people who God inspired to write the Bible seem to pray a lot and encourage believers to do that, too.

Our text is but one example. In ▶ 2 Thessalonians 3:1-2, Paul says,

> ESV 2 Thessalonians 3:1 Finally, brothers, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honored, as happened among you, 2 and that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men. For not all have faith.

Prior to this point, Paul has taken us through some deep theological waters in this second letter to the Thessalonians. Now it seems we're in the kiddie pool because it is so much easier to understand.

He simply asks the Thessalonians to pray for him. He asks them to pray that the word of God he preaches may be effective in bringing the life of Jesus to others, just as it had been effective in bringing life to them.

Paul also asks them to pray that he would be protected from some bad actors, who would like to silence him, because not everybody warms to faith in Jesus.

Paul continues in ▶ verses 3 and 4, saying,

> ESV 2 Thessalonians 3:3 But the Lord is faithful. He will establish you and guard you against the evil one. 4 And we have confidence in the Lord about you, that you are doing and will do the things that we command.

In saying that ▶ "the Lord is faithful," Paul is acknowledging their utter dependence on the faithfulness of God for success. That is why we pray. Because we can't do the Christian life on our own.

And Paul writes with conviction, saying of the Lord, ▶ "he will establish you."

How can he be so confident that the Lord will establish them?

Paul has been praying about it. That's how.

You may be wondering, "Bob, how do you know that Paul has been praying about it?"

I read.

I found the very same word “establish” in this prayer Paul gave back in ▶ 1 Thessalonians 3:12-13. He prays,

> ESV 1 Thessalonians 3:12 and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, 13 so that he may ***establish*** your hearts . . . [emphasis mine]

Also look at what Paul prays again just before our text. In ▶ 2 Thessalonians 2:16-17, this is Paul’s prayer:

> ESV 2 Thessalonians 2:16 Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, 17 comfort your hearts and ***establish*** them in every good work and word. [emphasis mine]

Paul is confident that the Lord will establish the Thessalonians because he has been praying for that all along.

There is a thread here.

- In his previous letter, Paul prays.
- Just before our text, Paul prays.
- Then, in the first part of our text, Paul encourages the Thessalonians to pray.
- Then, in the second part of our text, Paul declares the faithfulness of the Lord to be the basis for prayer.

Now, back in our text, in the last verse, ▶ verse 5, Paul does something shocking.

He prays.

Again.

> ESV 2 Thessalonians 3:5 May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ.

Paul prays that their hearts would apprehend and appreciate and apply God's love for them and Christ's patient endurance of hardship on their behalf.

Earlier, I likened our text to a kiddie pool because it is easy to understand compared to some of the deeper theological waters earlier in the letter. This may be a kiddie pool in terms of interpretation. But it is class-5 whitewater in terms of application. Prayer is hard to keep up. It goes against the current of life.

And yet, back in 1 Thessalonians 5:17, Paul says, "pray without ceasing." And here in our text, he practices what he preaches, weaving prayer into his letter.

Here is the big idea I draw from this: ▶ Keep the conversation going.

In an attempt to demystify prayer, I am calling it "conversation" here because that is basically what it is: a conversation with God. It is a two-way street.

In one direction, prayer is ▶ expressing our feelings to God. You may be familiar with the use of the acronym ACTS to convey the different forms of expression, including adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication. The acronym can be tied back to the eighteenth-century theologian, ▶ Charles Hodge, who explains that prayer involves . . .

> *The expression of our feelings in view of His greatness and glory, that is, adoration.* ▶ *The expression of our feelings in view of our sins and*

> *sinfulness, that is, confession. ▶ The expression of our feelings in view of His goodness, that is, thanksgiving. ▶ And, the expression of our feelings in view of our wants, that is, supplication.*[1]

In the other direction, prayer also includes ▶ listening to God. Listening to God involves a quiet, reflective, willing, and worshipful readiness to receive whatever God has for us. It's waiting on God for things like comfort, strength, direction, enablement, an idea, or a specific, personal application of something you've read in the Bible.

So, when we're talking about prayer, we're talking about ▶ both expressing our feelings to God and listening to God. That's the conversation in view.

You probably agree that it's a good idea to keep the conversation going. But, if you are like me, you find it a lot harder to actually keep it up.

For the rest of our time together, I want to address a few obstacles that tempt us to bail on prayer. Specifically, I am going to cover four ▶ reasons not to pray. It is not an exhaustive list, just a sampling of what I think are probably some of the more common reasons.

I suppose the number one reason we don't pray more is, ▶ "I'm too busy. I just don't have time. I've got too many other things on my plate."

When Jesus neared the end of his life on earth, he was able to say to God the Father, as recorded in ▶ John 17:4,

> ESV John 17:4 "I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do."

[1] Charles Hodge, Princeton Sermons, 291, quoted in Hannah, BibSac article,

By the way, this is part of a prayer.

And it is a remarkable statement. Jesus is saying that he was able to do all that he was supposed to do. Everything.

Some of you may be thinking, "Well Bob, Jesus had a slight advantage. He is God. What am I supposed to do?"

Author, pastor, and professor, ▶ Ben Patterson puts his finger on it in his book titled, *Deepening Your Conversation With God*. He says,

> ▶ *When was the last time you went to bed and looked back over a single day, feeling you could say you did all you were supposed to do? ▶ But there is always enough time to do what God wants us to do. ▶ The problem is we don't know what he wants because we're too busy doing what we think he might want done. ▶ It really wouldn't be a bad idea to ask him what he wants, would it? And then to listen?*[2]

Prayer is the key. Jesus modeled a life of prayer.

This is remarkable because, if there was ever anybody who needed to pray less than we do, it would be Jesus. You can't get much tighter with God the Father than by being God the Son. And if there was ever anybody who had more to do than we do, it would be Jesus. After all, Jesus had "Save the world" on his plate!

Nevertheless, Jesus took the time to pray. Listen to just a few verses that typify Jesus as a person of prayer.

▶ Mark 1:35 says,

[2] Patterson, 39.

ESV Mark 1:35 And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed.

- Luke 5:16 says,

  ESV Luke 5:16 But he would withdraw to desolate places and pray.

- Luke 6:12 says,

  ESV Luke 6:12 In these days he went out to the mountain to pray, and all night he continued in prayer to God.

Jesus regularly took pains to be alone with God in prayer for significant periods of time.

Jesus not only modeled this concept, he also taught it to his disciples directly.

- Mark 3:14-15 says,

  ESV Mark 3:14 And he appointed twelve (whom he also named apostles) so that they might be with him and he might send them out to preach 15 and have authority to cast out demons.

Notice Jesus called the original apostles to do three things in order.

First, be with him.

Second, preach.

Third, cast out demons. The *New Bob Version* renders it Sun Devils. Same thing.

So, the first work they had to do was to be with him. This is really another way of saying that their priority was prayer. Remember, prayer involves the expression of feelings to God and listening to God. That's what Jesus is telling them to do. Pray. Stay connected. Stay close. Keep the conversation going.

So, Jesus sends out his twelve disciples, and they experience success. Pray, preach, cast out demons. Pray, preach, cast out demons.

Then, the disciples began to do what we often do. I can almost hear one of them say. "Wow, my preaching schedule is getting full, and the number of demons to be cast out is growing. We're just too busy to pray as much as we've been praying. Let's cut back on prayer so we can do more preaching and cast out more demons. You know, pray less, do more."

The logical extent of this thinking is to crowd out prayer altogether so more work can be done, all the while overlooking the fact that prayer *is* the work.

Well, it had to happen sooner or later. The disciples skipped prayer altogether and reached a point where their ministry became impotent. They tried to cast out a demon from a boy and couldn't. Jesus was irritated with their prayerlessness. He says in ▶ Mark 9:19,

> ESV Mark 9:19 . . . "O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him to me."

Bewildered, the disciples asked Jesus why they weren't able to cast out the demon. ▶ Mark 9:29 records his response.

> ESV Mark 9:29 And he said to them, "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer."

God calls us to pray, not only to find out what to do, but also to tap into the power of God to do it. Prayer is our source of direction and power. Prayer is God's work.

Somehow, we have come to believe the lie that there's real work and then there's prayer. And we'd rather do something than pray something. We think that prayer is unproductive. But the truth is, prayer *is* the work of God.

Patterson explains,

> ▶ Prayer is always the first thing to go when we get caught up in the world's pace. And only prayer can deliver us from that pace ▶. . . the greatest paradox of prayer [is] that only when we give up on our human efforts can God's work begin and, mysteriously, human effort can come to fulfillment.[3]

The next reason we don't pray more is, ▶ "I get no answers. When I pray nothing happens. I don't get what I ask for. I might as well be talking to a wall."

Of course, this excuse for not praying is tied to only one aspect of prayer, supplication.

Let's think through why supplications can seem unanswered, using something I've never used before. ▶ A diagram.

First, we're going to consider the ▶ request, the thing we ask for in prayer. Is the request right or wrong? By right or wrong, I don't mean, "Is it morally good or morally bad?" I mean, "Is it in keeping with God's

[3] Patterson, 37, 40-41.

will or not?" If the request is wrong, that is, if the request does not line up with God's will, God says, ▶ "No."

This flies in the face of those who view God as a cosmic vending machine who is obligated to give us what we want if we put in a prayer. In 2 Corinthians 12:8-9, Paul prayed fervently and repeatedly that he would be healed of a chronic ailment. God said no.

Even if the request is right, there is still the matter of ▶ timing. You see, the thing you ask for may be in God's will, but not in God's timing. If the timing is wrong, God says, ▶ "Slow." In these cases, we simply persevere in prayer and wait.

But, even if the timing is right, there is still the matter of ▶ you. Are you right with God? If you are wrong, God says, ▶ "Grow." Sometimes God wants to iron out some wrinkles in our character before he gives us things. There are a number of problems we may have to address before we can expect to hear from God.

The first problem is ▶ prayerlessness. Seems so simple, but the truth is, many times we don't receive because we just don't ask enough. ▶ James 4:2 says,

> ESV James 4:2 . . . You do not have, because you do not ask.

Another problem is ▶ selfishness. James 4:3 says,

> ESV James 4:3 You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.

Another problem is ▶ unconfessed sin. Sometimes God wants us to allow him to clean up an area of our lives before we move on in the direction we'd like to go. Isaiah 59:2 says,

> ESV Isaiah 59:2 but your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear.

Another problem is an ▶ uncaring attitude. If you're a slum lord who abuses your poor tenants, you better think twice about God hearing your own cry for help when you need him. Proverbs 21:13 says,

> ESV Proverbs 21:13 Whoever closes his ear to the cry of the poor will himself call out and not be answered.

Another problem is unresolved relational ▶ conflict. When we come before God, he wants us to clean up our relationships, pursue reconciliation, and be at peace with others as much as possible.

Mark 11:25 says,

> ESV Mark 11:25 "And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses."

▶ First Peter 3:7 also says,

> ESV 1 Peter 3:7 Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered.

Another problem is ▶ unbelief. God wants us to ask, believing he can deliver. James 1:5-7 says,

> ESV James 1:5 If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. ▶ 6 But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. ▶ 7 For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord;

A final problem is ▶ unwillingness. Don't pray for God's direction if you're not willing to take it. In prayer, we can't have a shopper's mentality that says, "God, show me what you're offering, then I'll think about whether or not I'll buy it." God reveals his will to those who are willing to do his will.

In John 7:17 Jesus says,

> ESV John 7:17 "If anyone's will is to do God's will, he will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own authority."

Jesus is saying that anyone who is willing to do the will of God will be able to discern the authority of his teaching and directions. So, in order to get directions, we need to be willing to take directions.

So sometimes when we pray, if we are wrong in any of ▶ these areas—prayerlessness, selfishness, unconfessed sin, uncaring attitude, unresolved conflict, unbelief, unwillingness—God says, "Grow. I want you to grow up. We need to take care of some things, then we'll talk."

I am not suggesting you need to be perfect before God will hear you. It's a lot like a child asking a parent for something good, but with a bad attitude. And the parent says, "We're going to have to deal with your attitude before we get to what you want."

Finally, if the request is right, the timing is right, and you are right, then God says, ▶ "Go."

So, the next time we're tempted to blow off prayer because we think we get no answers, consider the diagram. Maybe we're the problem. Maybe we need to change our attitude or our behavior.

Another reason we don't pray more is that some people say, ▶ "I'm bitter. My life is the pits. I feel like God has turned his back on me. I don't even feel like talking to him."

Most of us have felt that way at one time or another.

In ▶ Psalm 22:1, David cries out,

> ESV Psalm 22:1 My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning?

About a thousand years later, Jesus, while hanging on the cross, takes David's words as his own. As recorded in ▶ Matthew 27:46, Jesus cries out,

> ESV Matthew 27:46 . . . "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

David and Jesus.

That's pretty good company for those of us feeling abandoned by God.

The important thing is not that they felt abandoned, although that is comforting. The important thing is that they kept the conversation going

when they felt abandoned. They did not allow their hard feelings to lure them into cutting off communication with God.

So, if you're feeling bitter, cry out to the Lord. Let him have it. Don't turn anywhere else. Keep the conversation going.

The final reason for not praying is, ▶ "I'm doing fine. I pray when there's a crisis or something big, but most of the time, I don't feel like I really need to pray. I'm doing fine."

Saving prayer only for times of crisis will not serve us well. The hard work of keeping the conversation going prepares us for big things in advance. Praying only in a time of crisis is like trying to run a marathon without training for it. Praying only in a time of crisis is like trying to draw upon the depth of a relationship when no depth has been created.

Consider the example of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night before his crucifixion. You may recall that Jesus asked Peter, James, and John to join him in prayer. But the disciples were too tired to pray. They fell asleep. While they slept, Jesus was hard at work, praying. ▶ Luke 22:44 says,

> ESV Luke 22:44 And being in agony he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground.

If all we had was a snapshot of this moment, it would be easy to misinterpret the situation. If Jesus is so broken up when all he is doing is praying in the quietness of the garden, what is he going to do when the real crisis hits? Wouldn't it be better for him to emulate the quiet confidence and peace of his disciples, who are sleeping?

But we see the bigger picture. When the real crisis hit, the once-sleeping disciples fell apart like a pack of pansies. They panicked and ran away from Jesus and denied him.

In contrast, Jesus faced the crisis of the cross with composure and courage and conviction.

Jesus was able to face the cross courageously because he was all prayed up. He was able to draw upon the depth of his relationship with the Father, created by the hard work of keeping the conversation going.

This sheds new light on the last verse of our text, ▶ verse 5, where Paul prays,

> ESV 2 Thessalonians 3:5 May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ.

"Steadfastness" comes from the Greek word, ὑπομονή (*hoopo-moe-náy*). It describes a "steadfast adherence to a course of action in spite of difficulties and testings."[4] Surely, a part of the steadfastness of Christ to which our hearts should be directed—a part we should emulate—is his steadfastness in prayer.

Which brings us back to the big idea: ▶ Keep the conversation going.

Let's pray.

Lord, help us to keep the conversation with you going, recognizing that prayer is at the heart of the work you have given us to do. Amen.

We are going to observe communion today which was instituted by the Lord as a tangible way to keep the conversation going.

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[4] Friberg, Analytical Greek Lexicon.

There are two identically prepared tables up front, which offer the bread and the cup. The bread represents Christ's body given for you and me on the cross in payment for our sins. The cup represents his blood shed for our forgiveness.

On the basis of what Christ has done for us on the cross, he offers us the free gift of everlasting life, which includes forgiveness and adoption into God's forever family and eternal salvation from the ultimate penalty of our sin. All we have to do to receive this gift is to believe in him for it.

If you have not yet believed in Jesus for eternal life, I invite you to do so now. If you do, this communion will celebrate the beginning of your new life.

For those who have already believed in Jesus, as we reflect on Christ's sacrifice for us, let this be a time of prayerful adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication.

I am going to pray, then music will be played. During the music, you may come forward to either of the two tables to take the elements. You may consume the elements up front, right away, or take them back to your seat for whenever you are ready.

If for any reason you would like me to serve you the elements right where you are seated, that would be my privilege. Just raise your hand when the time comes, and I will find my way to you.

Let's pray. Lord, thank you for demonstrating your great love for us on the cross. Thank you for your steadfastness. As we take the bread and drink the cup, we proclaim our faith in you. Amen.